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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 003992

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SUBJECT: HEARINGS IN THE ASSEMBLY FOR FM, MOU, DEFMIN GO SMOOTHLY

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Foreign Minister-designate Song Min-soon, Defense Minister-designate Kim Jang-soo and Unification Minister-designate Lee Jae-jeong all passed through committee hearings in the National Assembly with relative ease on November 16 and 17. The Assembly has no power to stop cabinet nominations and merely holds a committee hearing for each nominee (usually one day) and then sends a report to the Blue House with their assessment of the potential cabinet members. Despite the severe outcry over all the nominees but DefMin-designate Kim, the opposition GNP resigned itself to the reality of the cabinet reshuffle, took their verbal shots during the hearings and passed on the three nominees that have come before hearings thus far. END SUMMARY.

Song Min-soon

¶2. (C) The ruling Uri Party and the opposition Grand National Party (GNP)'s Floor Leaders reached a final agreement on November 16 to cooperate on the hearings for the four cabinet nominees and even Song, who has been attacked the most fiercely of the minister-designates since his nomination, passed through his hearings with relative ease.

¶3. (C) The GNP lawmakers in the Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee came to Song Min-soon's hearing 45 minutes late in protest and once they arrived, asked pointed questions for the career diplomat. The main criticism of Song was that he had strongly supported the failed engagement policy toward the North. In addition, many of the GNP committee members criticized Song for his anti-U.S. statements while he served as Roh's National Security Advisor. GNP lawmaker Nam Kyong-pil said that Song seemed to disregard international cooperation and resist U.S. initiatives.

Lee Jae-jeong

¶4. (C) Minister of Unification-designate Lee Jae-jeong has received almost as much negative press since his nomination as FM-designate Song and his hearings were testy, focusing on Lee's support for continued engagement with the North. Park Jin, a GNP lawmaker, said that Lee "did not meet any of the criteria to be Minister." Lee pressed ahead in his support for engagement policy and said he would push for aid to help the people of North Korea. He said also that Kaesong

Industrial Complex (KIC) and Mt. Kumgang tourism project were vital from a security perspective, since they eased tensions on the Peninsula. He hoped the ROK could resume rice and fertilizer aid to the North once the National Assembly agreed it was appropriate to do so.

Kim Jang-soo

¶5. (C) General Kim's nomination was welcomed by even Roh's staunchest foes, noting that Kim has had a distinguished military career, free from political activity. Questions he faced during his hearings were focused on North Korea, OPCON and Iraq. He said that the U.S.-ROK alliance was the cornerstone of the military balance on the Peninsula and that the U.S. nuclear umbrella was essential.

Comment

¶6. (C) While the hearings could not be termed friendly, the relative smoothness (no one blocked entry to the hearings or otherwise forced a postponement - which is not unheard of) with which they were conducted was a positive sign that reflected the acknowledgement by the GNP that politically they would not gain much from a battle over the nominations. One explanation is that the GNP is starting to take its opposition responsibilities seriously, trying to show the public that it is taking the high road in dealing with the Uri Party. While on November 15, the GNP blocked the dais overnight to prevent the approval of Constitutional Court Justice Chon Hyo-seok's nomination, the GNP and Uri Party floor leaders peaceably reached agreement to revisit the Chun nomination on November 30 after addressing the more important national security nominations.

VERSHBOW